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ABSTRACT

This document analyzes and evaluates dilemmas and difficulties in developing/implementing "progressive television," a kind of television that seeks to transgress the boundaries of dominant (mainstream) television by proposing a new constellation of television production and consumption. The ideal is described as a television that tries to stimulate the audience to thought, or inspire them to believe, or remind them of their humanness, with the result that the position of the audience becomes a central issue. It is noted that: (1) it is up to the audience to take up the role of active, committed citizens to bring about the development of an ideal, progressive television; (2) the function of "progressive television" is totally different from that of mainstream television; and (3) the narrator in progressive television speaks on behalf of and for the benefit of the whole audience. An example is provided by describing the experiences of a self-proclaimed "progressive television" organization embodied by the Dutch Socialist broadcasting organization, VARA, which is set up to represent the interests and preferences of the democratic socialist current within the Dutch nation. It is concluded that "progressive television" can never be a given ideal that transcends time and place, but is something that has to be constructed again and again under ever-changing circumstances. (45 end notes/references) (CGD)

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The Vicissitudes of 'Progressive Television'

(draft)

Paper presented to the
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In pursuit of 'progressive television'

'If there is ever to be an American television industry that aims to do something different, to challenge us rather than hook us and fawn us and condescend us, it would have to come because publics organize to insist on it, in part at least out of a felt need and desire to create a public domain where citizens can feel empowered to transact public affairs.' [1]

This is part of how Todd Gitlin rounds off his *Inside Prime Time,* a celebrated survey of the inside world of American network television. The quote reveals the position from which Gitlin has approached the industry: on the one hand, that of the critical outsider (the networks are 'them'), on the other hand, that of the representative of 'us', those who are hooked, fawned, and condescended. Gitlin's tone is an indignant, albeit somewhat tired one: like so many progressives, he demonstrates an intense discontent with the social and cultural outcome of the greedy commercialism of American television, and opts for another, different television - one that is at least 'more intelligent, complicated, true, beautiful, or public-spirited'. [2] The ideal, then, is a television that tries 'to stimulate us to thought, or inspire us to belief, or remind us of what it is to be human and live on the earth late in the twentieth century'.[3]

However, where Gitlin leaves no doubt that the American, commercial model of television production cannot possibly meet his ideal of progressive television - *Inside Prime Time* gives us an almost cynical account of the networks' endless, obsessive attempts to 'hook' -, it remains less clear how alternatives should be brought about. In the end, Gitlin can do nothing else but resort to the image of (and hope for) a better

audience, that will act as 'publics (who) organize to insist on it'. Typically, *Inside Prime Time*'s very last sentence is a rather rueful quote from Walt Whitman: 'To have great poets there must be great audiences, too.'[4] In other words, it is the absence of an active and engaged public life that, in Gitlin's vision, is the ultimate background of the deplorable state of American television culture. But the diagnosis can also be extended to a more international plane. According to Gitlin, another economic and institutional set-up of broadcast television does not suffice: 'By itself, the formal structure of a noncommercial television system along European lines wouldn't accomplish all that much; the mass-marketing mentality pervades much of noncommercial American television to almost the same degree as in America, though without the compulsion of the profit motive.'[5] So, it is up to 'us': only by refusing our positioning as television consumers, and by taking up the role of active, committed citizens could an ideal, progressive television begin to be developed. This is a rather bold appeal, and also, I would add, an amazingly awkward one. For who is this amorphous 'we' Gitlin is speaking for? And how are 'we' supposed to attain the energy and motivation to perform the task, if the very condition for it (a lively public sphere) is lacking? It is the voluntarism implied in the appeal that makes it sound so awesome and daunting.

In this paper, I will try to unravel some of the dilemmas and difficulties of the project of 'progressive television', to which Gitlin bears witness. By the project of 'progressive television' I mean all those critical concerns and pursuits, in theory and practice, that aim at changing television as a cultural form and political apparatus, based upon a shared rejection of dominant or mainstream television as conservative to all intents and purposes.[6] I will restrict myself here to the case of broadcast

television, that hegemonic institutional organisation of television that is characterized, in the words of Raymond Williams, by centralised transmission and privatised reception.[7] Many attempts to create 'progressive television' are of course done outside the parameters of broadcasting, but it seems to me that these should be analysed and evaluated in a different context -- they do not pose a challenge to the large-scale practices of broadcast television. It is the limits of the broadcasting model that will be at issue here.

Of course, it would not be fair to consider Gitlin's formulations as a fully-fledged proposal for the arrangement of a 'progressive television'. After all, this was not been his ambition in *Inside Prime Time* at all.[8] But the very awkwardness of the book's epilogue - from which the quotes above have been taken - reveals the more general unease that confronts critical observers who not only want to analyze and criticize the television we have, but also aim to construct visions of a television we could have. As with every utopian perspective, the precise substance of this other television remains elusive. It is mostly defined in negative terms, in what it should *not* be. Thus, whereas, according to Gitlin, 'weightless images'[8] reign supreme in American commercial television, most critics would agree that 'progressive television' should amount to something, that it should have some wider social, political and cultural relevance. Rather than as a contribution to the outlining of the substance of a 'progressive television', then, we could read *Inside Prime Time* 's epilogue as a narrative which not only is motivated by desire for a television whose functioning is totally different from dominant television, but also one whose narrator seems to claim to speak on behalf and to the benefit of the whole audience, 'all of us'. If I understand Gitlin correctly,

his ideal is a television that would not only result in the production and transmission of entirely different programmes, but would also culminate in a completely altered positioning of the audience: as subject rather than object, as publics rather than consumers.

A rather peculiar model for a politics of 'progressive television' emerges here. It is 'revolutionary' in that it is based upon a radical oppositioning between 'dominant television' and 'progressive television', upon an absolute certainty that commercial television will always ultimately be condescending, and, what's more, reproduce bourgeois hegemony.[9] From this point of view, a politics of 'progressive television' can be conceptualized in no other way than from a 'vanguardist' position. Particularly striking is the missionary and teleological character of its aims: it seeks for transgression of the boundaries of dominant television by proposing a wholly new constellation of television production and consumption.

A totalizing vision characterizes this concept of 'progressive television'. It is premised upon the assumption that universal standards are possible according to which a new television culture could be designed. It is driven by an ethos of emancipation, democratic participation, 'civilization'.

It is clear that such a comprehensive 'cultural revolution' is hard to imagine, let alone realize. What does it mean, for example, to expect television to stimulate thought and inspire belief, thereby contributing to the strengthening and enlivening of the public sphere, as Gitlin would have it? How must 'progressive television' help realize this Habermas-oriented social utopia? In relation to this, I would suggest, the position of the audience becomes an central issue. As there seems to be no doubt that the

'we' that would be prepared to take up the challenge will only be a rather small section of the population, must it be 'our' task to convince 'the others' to join the project? In other words, should television viewers be educated to become the 'great audiences' Whitman pondered about? Should they learn to resist being hooked, fawned, and condescended?

I may have thrusted Gitlin's notes too far. I have done this, however, in order to get a clearer picture of the implicit scheme that is often at work in critiques of dominant, commercial television. A perfect future alternative is evoked before which the television we have loses all lustre. A complete rupture between ideal and reality is therefore created: a typical case of utopian thinking.

But whereas such a distant, utopian stance could easily be maintained when one remains in the position of the critical outsider, it is far more problematic to conceive it as a basis for concrete action. To confront the existing arrangement of television culture, a politics of 'progressive television' cannot indulge in utopianism; it has to intervene in the structures in which that culture is currently produced. For one thing, broadcast television is a highly institutionalized practice and change does not seem to be possible outside some institutional context. But which one? Although there is a rather widespread agreement among progressives against commercialism, the defense of public broadcasting is also fraught with problems. [10] As Gitlin has already noted, many public broadcasting organizations are only noncommercial in a formal sense, and are actually prone to the same preoccupation to hook as the American networks. The question, then, cannot be resolved within the debate on public versus commercial broadcasting. More important, I would suggest, is to evaluate

how the ideals of 'progressive television' can be pursued within the present cultural conjuncture - a conjuncture in which the dominance of (American) commercial television, and its popularity, is ever expanding. Under these circumstances, 'progressive television' can be nothing else but a 'counter-television'. What role could utopian ideals play in this?

It is not my intention to tackle this issue in the abstract. Instead, I will be drawing upon a specific historical case that in many ways is in accordance with Gitlin's voluntaristic appeal indicated above: the setting up of institutions by progressives themselves, who would earnestly set themselves the task to establish 'progressive television' in some way or other.[11] I am speaking of an internationally little known case of self-proclaimed 'progressive television', embodied by the Dutch Socialist broadcasting organization VARA. Within the general framework of Dutch public broadcasting, VARA constitutes a broadcasting practice that is more specifically set up to represent the interests and preferences of the democratic socialist current within the Dutch nation.[12] Although the position of VARA in the Dutch national context is a very specific one, which I will not go into here, more general conclusions can be drawn from its experiences. Of course, VARA's politics cannot be seen as a perfect incarnation of the utopian project as designed above. Inscribed in its aims and ideals, however, is the very rhetoric of emancipation and universalism that I find characteristic for the project. By exploring the problems VARA is confronted with in its attempts to perform its task, I hope to assess the general entanglements of this 'utopianism in practice'. As will become clear, a central issue in this is the very definition of the politics of 'progressive television' itself. It is precisely utopian reasoning, I would suggest, that turns the ideal of 'progressive television' against itself.

Institutionalized progressivism

Throughout the sixty years of its existence, the Dutch Socialist broadcasting network VARA has been committed to the ideal of producing and transmitting 'progressive television' for a committed, working-class audience. VARA is one of the five oldest and largest networks within the Dutch public broadcasting system. Founded in 1925, the organization has traditionally had formal ties with the social democratic movement, such as the Labour Party and the social democratic trade union. These ties were transformed into informal ones in the late sixties.[13] As a consequence, from then on VARA's basis of 'progressiveness' cannot be considered as self-evident anymore, as something that can be simply conjured up by referring to formal institutional associations with other, ideologically 'correct' political organizations. VARA is now left to its own will and devices to give an expression to its self-proclaimed 'progressiveness'. It arduously persists in its official aspiration to be a "cultural and political instrument for progressive Netherlands"[14], but how can this aim be accomplished? As a result, VARA has become preoccupied with the question how to fulfil its 'mission' - to express it in VARA language. Thus, the profuse policy debates within VARA in the past fifteen years can be interpreted as resulting from heated controversies over what it means to make 'progressive television'.[15]

For example, in the early seventies one group of VARA workers and sympathizers, mostly belonging to related leftist circles, opted for a radical socialist VARA, with a commitment to class struggle and to the

strenghtening of working class consciousness, solidarity and political activism.[16] VARA programmes produced by adherents to this group, typically reflected its philosophy: these were mostly radical populist documentaries in which the exploitation of the working class and other oppressed groups in capitalist society is shown and condemned.[17] Implied in this conception of 'progressive television' is the assumption that television as a medium could be utilized as a tool for political mobilization - a hypothesis that was borrowed from Enzensberger's theory of 'emancipatory media'[18]. However, this option, criticized within VARA on its crude obtrusiveness and its consequent lack of popular appeal, was soon superseded by a more moderate current. It also called itself 'socialist', but its version of socialism is less a political than a moral one. Not class struggle, but the cultural and ethical emancipation - that is, elevation - of the people are its central aim. According to one spokesman of this current, it should be the task of VARA to spread Enlightment ideals such as rationality, tolerance, and human dignity among the people (working class or otherwise).[19] In connection with this goes a more modest assessment of the political potential of the television medium. Television cannot be used as an instigator for political action and social change, so it is said,-it can only signal social discontents and inform the public about them. Furthermore, it is stated that VARA should perform this task by transmitting programmes that are accessible and appealing to a large audience: to make full use of the potential of broadcast television as a mass medium it should not only be progressive, but also popular. From this point of view, VARA's role is that of public mentor, of popular educator. It should teach and try to help endow the people with the right mentality; only then can a better, more just society be brought within reach. We need

not quarrel about the ideological and political pros and cons of this specification of 'progressive television''s intent here, suffices it to say that it is this philosophy about 'progressive television' that still informs VARA's self-conception today.

Of course, carrying out this project is not without difficulties. But these are mostly conceived of as practical ones, having to do with the concrete pressures brought to bear upon the institution. In the last few years, for instance, VARA has decided for a programming that is heavily spiced with spectacular quiz shows and popular comedies, to attract a large audience. Critics have slashed this policy with the argument that VARA has now betrayed its own 'progressive' aims and surrendered to the despised logic of the ratings. In reaction to this, VARA officials defend the policy by referring to its delicate position in relation to the 'commercial' networks:[20] popular programmes are deemed necessary, in order to beat them with their own weapons. Besides, it is stated that VARA could only be genuinely progressive if and when it manages to speak to the bulk of the common people, and giving them popular entertainment is seen as one way to increase their support for the organization, and as a first step to draw their attention to the progressive messages that are communicated in, for example, the current affairs programme. It is denied that such a strategy would pose a threat to VARA's 'progressiveness': "It is our popularity, not our [progressive] identity that is the problem." [21] In other words, what is at stake is VARA's survival (for which a large following is necessary), not its ideological stance.

Whatever the conflicts over the specific content given to the notion of 'progressive television' may be, the consensus over VARA's *raison d'etre* as an independent broadcasting organization that should be loyal to

progressive politics (however defined[22]) has never been challenged. On the contrary, this ideological commitment is a necessary precondition for the functioning of VARA. In other words, 'progressiveness' is the key marker by which VARA attempts to construct its identity, it is used both epistemologically and rhetorically to legitimize its own existence and support. At the same time, however, 'progressiveness' also functions as a signifier for VARA's difference, for the way in which VARA presents itself as distinct from other broadcasting companies. The stress on difference is all the more important, as noted above, in the light of VARA's need to compete with other popular, commercially oriented networks whose programming is directed at the same sections of the audience. After all, VARA wants to be progressive, and popular too. Or conversely, VARA wants to be popular, but in a progressive manner. It needs a 'progressive identity' to differentiate itself from the 'merely popular'. This is why VARA clings, at least in principle, to its self-definition as a 'leftwing popular network'.[23]

VARA, then, represents a broadcasting practice for which 'progressiveness' is its ideological 'essence'. Located within a firm institutional framework, the project of 'progressive television' seems here to possess a principally safeguarded setting, a committed custodian. In this sense, VARA could be considered as one courageous representative of 'us', actually adopting the undertaking Gitlin dreams about. However, as is already indicated above, the practical outcome of the undertaking is far from untroubled by ambivalences. It is hardly surprising, for instance, that the emphasis on popular entertainment in this version of 'progressive television' is so controversial. Exactly these ambivalences however could be seen as symptomatic for the more general problems and limits of the

project. Should VARA's policy be interpreted as another surrender to the mass-marketing mentality, which according to Gitlin pervades European public broadcasting? I will try to point out now that the problem is more complex and structural than this. VARA's programming dilemmas are not so much the result of pressing external forces (such as the aggressiveness of commercial competitors) or internal weaknesses (such as lack of dedication to its own aims), but should first and foremost be associated with the very definition of the project. With VARA, the utopian project of 'progressive television' has become institutionalized. I will try to point out now that, as a matter of paradox, this 'institutional progressivism' tends to impede and inhibit the development of 'progressive television'.

Vicissitudes

For an organization like VARA, its identity/difference as popular leftwing network constitutes its ultimate sure truth. Whatever its actual accomplishments, its intentions are 'progressive' - nobody is allowed to throw doubt upon that. As a result, progressiveness for VARA is something taken for granted, it serves as imaginary source and self-defined justification for all its activities. But 'progressive television' can never be the automatic result of 'progressive' intentions; it needs much effort to construct it. And VARA is not unaware of this. However, its self-image as 'a network with a mission' logically leads to a conception of broadcasting practice as an ideally linear process in which a pre-existent commitment is to be expressed in programming choices and decisions. The making of

progressive television then tends to be defined as merely a problem of translation: a certain progressive essence, located in the intentions of the institution, has to be reflected, in some way or other, in concrete television programmes. This is a rather mechanistic conception of the production of 'progressive television', and it is inevitable that this would lead to tremendous difficulties for the institution as to what kinds of programmes should be broadcast.[24]

Programming as instrumental to an a priori ideological substance: this is the fate of the politics of 'progressive television' when it is cast within the framework of institutionalized progressivism. Not surprisingly, the problem is most easily solved where the translation process appears to be the most transparent: in the area of the journalistic. As a result, for VARA informative programmes about themes that are readily recognized as relevant for the left (think about Third World politics or nuclear disarmement) are the ideological pointers of its programming strategy. Hence, genres like current affairs, documentaries, and, in some sense, talk shows are seen to be VARA's 'identity carriers' - it is in these programmes that the progressive identity of the institution is alleged to be most clearly displayed.[25] But what about other genres? How are they conceptualized? To be sure, a large number of VARA programmes are entertainment programmes, but these are not seen as 'identity carriers'. In VARA's philosophy, most entertainment programmes are not suitable as vehicles for progressive meanings (how, for example, is a progressive quiz show to be distinguished from other ones?). That is, they are part of the schedule not to contribute to VARA's progressive profile, but to its popularity. Entertainment is not seen as politically meaningful in itself, but as a means to get in touch with the mass audience.[26] The gap between

'identity' and 'non-identity' is resolved here by the statement that entertainment programmes should at least not be in conflict with VARA's identity. For example, in selecting foreign fiction series, VARA generally shuns American commercial products - somehow it is considered obvious that serials like *Dallas* would not fit in VARA's identity - in favour of British and Italian serials with a more 'arty' status.[27]

In other words, VARA programmes can have two functions: they are either assigned the role of strengthening its institutional identity, or are principally designed to reach a large audience. Progressiveness and popularity are thus conceived as fixed entities external to each other. Both are seen as equally important for the institution, and one of the problems that persistently preoccupies the network is how to find a well-balanced menu with both elements; the portion of each must not be too large or too little. A rather irksome task, which has elicited many quarrels and disputes. I don't want to go into the details of VARA's programming politics any further here, however. More important to point out is how this quite 'schizophrenic' conception of television programming reveals the way in which VARA comprehends its relationship with the audience. I will try to demonstrate now that this relationship is typically characterized by a troubled-fusion of paternalism and populism, and that this double attitude towards television viewers is not so much symptomatic for a 'mistaken identity', but represents a fundamental problem that is inherent in institutionalized progressivism.

As every broadcasting network, a progressive institution needs a sense of being successful in order to be able to continue its activities. Commercial networks pragmatically define 'success' in terms of ratings and profit. For an institution like VARA, however, notions of success must

be spelled out in a more qualitative, idealist manner: the institution's ambition to perform a 'progressive' role in society demands the belief and the presupposition that its practice achieve something beyond the maintenance of its own position. In order to remain true to its own identity, it must thus assume a surplus of effectivity - and this effectivity cannot but be located in the specific practice concerned: broadcasting. Its programmes must be watched by the audience, but - unlike in the case of commercial television - this in itself is not enough: in principle, watching television is merely seen here as an assisting agency through which a larger politico-ideological effect must be reached. Success, in other words, is specified here as the successful and persuasive communication of ideas, values and tastes the institution has designated as belonging to some 'progressive world view'. This success, of course, is a rather elusive matter, but it must always be somehow presumed and imagined in the operations of the institution. One former VARA chairman has made the issue very clear:

> Roughly speaking, we can distinguish between two sorts of networks. The first sees radio and television solely as a means of satisfying the needs of the mass audience, no matter what needs. Its highest aspiration is to please the largest common denominator of the public, without demanding any effort. [...] The other type of network wants things with the audience. It is not satisfaction of manifest needs that is the most important, but change of patterns of needs, cultivation of discrimination, orientation towards values that go further than the satisfaction of needs. All this demands effort. [28]

Whose effort, we could ask, and to what effect? If 'progressive television' is to be considered as an 'art of effects',[29] its target is the television audience. To put it disrespectfully, whereas commercial television delivers audiences to advertisers, 'progressive television', at

least when it is constructed within the context of institutional progressivism, aims to deliver audiences to the institution's stated ideals. The difference is, of course, that for commercial networks 'any other purpose is subordinated to the larger design of keeping a sufficient number of people tuned in', as Gitlin cynically remarks[30], whereas a 'network with a mission' (progressive or otherwise) needs to keep a sufficient number of people tuned in in order to be sufficiently effective in its idealist, public purpose. And it is this problem, brought about by the very arrangement of the broadcasting model, that has to be solved. After all, the broadcasting situation confronts the institution with a heterogeneous, anonymous 'mass' of potential viewers, whose readiness to pay attention to the institution's mission cannot possibly be guaranteed. Thus, what comes to the fore as a central problematic here is the need to overcome the contrast between two opposing modes of addressing viewers: on the one hand, they are to be imagined as a political and moral category, a <u>public</u> to be instructed and enlightened, on the other hand, they will also inevitably be constructed as <u>audience</u>, a category instrumental to the interests of the institution itself.[31]

Within VARA, the purport of this contradiction is expressed in its evocation of the 'ordinary people' as its target group.[32] The 'ordinary people' are a key term in VARA discourse in that it magically resolves the ambivalences in VARA's pretensions. On the one hand; it serves as a statistical measure: it delimits the broad, quantitative range of the 'mass' to be reached. After all, there are so many 'ordinary people'... These are the people that are sociologically defined as those with low income and little schooling, i.e. 40 per cent of the Dutch population![33] VARA wants to work for all these people. At the same time, the 'ordinary people' are also

positioned as those whom VARA wants to protect: they are seen as 'the socially vulnerable' who are most susceptible to the seductions of commercial television. Of course, VARA cannot do very much, and says it does not wish to, against their watching 'violent scuffles and relationships in the lives of oil magnates',[34] but it considers it as its ethical task to save the 'ordinary people' from the threat of ongoing cultural 'proletarization' that commercial television represents. As an imaginary contruct, then, the 'ordinary people' performs a magnificent reconciliatory role: it enables VARA to solve the conflict between its public mission and its need of an audience - at least on a discursive, theoretical level.

Practically, however, this same construct leads to a mode of addressing viewers that reveals a troubled blending of paternalism and populism. Paternalism is the inevitable result of VARA's pedagogic approach of viewers. Such an approach goes hand in hand with any project of 'progressive television' that starts out with a fixed idea of what is right and wrong, and VARA feels justified, obliged even, to distribute this to the public at large. Populism, on the other hand, is propelled by the realization that the audience it adresses is often resistant to its pedagogical appeals. Populism, in other words, is the result of a paternalism gone astray; it is the anxious reaction of the pedagogue facing unwilling pupils. Populism, then, is a didactic tactic by which VARA attempts to win viewers over, to gain their sympathy, in order to be more effective in its over-all pedagogic mission. Hence, chairman Marcel van Dam passionately defends VARA's very popular, but critically scorned comedy series *Zeg 's AAA*, not only by contending that 'ordinary people' have a right to have a good laugh, but also that the programme could pull viewers into the more serious one following it.[35] The typical reasoning

behind the sandwich formula.

VARA's programming dilemmas are fundamentally connected with the obvious difficulty in keeping the two approaches in balance: too much paternalism will drive the audience off; too much populism will endanger the network's identity/difference. However it may be, though, both paternalism and populism are marked by an equally distant stance towards viewers. Both attitudes are informed by an awareness that a profound chasm has to be overcome. It would seem, then, that the relationship between television institution and viewers will necessarily tend to take on the form of an opposition between 'us' and 'them', 'them' and 'us'. So, one programme maker gave vent to his concern about VARA's dilemma in these impassioned words:

> [...] it is necessary for us to speak a language they understand, but with the content we deem important. We should not dilute [our message] more and more until [they] are prepared to watch and listen to our programmes; we should have the courage to be consistently educative, simple in tone and sincere in content, until even they will want us.[36]

What is painfully expressed here is a troubled mixture of self-righteousness and regret. A desired future is projected in which the opposition between 'them' and 'us' will no longer exist because all will then be part of one great community, though under one condition: it will be under the banner of 'us'. But sadly enough this honourable utopian project encounters much resistance: eventually, the image of the 'obstinate audience'[37] looms up - an audience that does not seem to watch television 'properly', an audience that does not live up to its desired positioning of public to be enlightened, an audience that stubbornly refuses to listen to the good, 'progressive' message. Here then lies the ultimate irony of

institutionalized progressivism: its aspiration to educate viewers into an enlightened public becomes conflated with an urge to transform them into a 'better audience', better according to the institution's own standards, and for its own sake. Motivated by its self-asserted ethical purpose, in short, the institution ends up striving for control over the television viewing practices of the people 'out there'.

At this point, the import of the mass-marketing mentality that is said to pervade the practices of European public broadcasting, can be clarified. It is not just an institutional error or weakness that could be overturned out of principle or choice ('our' choice); it is, I would argue, a general drift of broadcast television as such, in so far as it necessarily implies a notion of viewers as an audience whose attention has to be attracted, whose interest has to be whet, whose favour has to be gained. The notion of audience-as-object, which is the core of marketing philosophy, can be found operative, in some way or other, in every television network, even if advanced marketing techniques are not always as widely used as in America.[38] Here, the claim to produce 'progressive television' for a public is confronted with the structural limits of broadcast television.

To repeat Williams' phrase, broadcasting formally consists of centralised transmission and privatised reception - a constellation of power reminiscent of the Panopticon described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. The panoptic structuring of power enables a central gaze to monitor those subjected to it constantly, forcing the latter into the position of compulsory visibility. In a similar but curiously reversed way, broadcast television is arranged in such a way so as to direct attention to itself by placing itself in the privileged position of permanent visibility, and complementary to this, it manoeuvres people into the position of

'compulsory' viewers, of audience. If panoptic power is excercised by making the subjects being permanently seen, broadcast television enacts a form of power based upon the principle of impelling the subjects to see, to look, to watch.[39] Considered from this perspective, then, the practices of television networks, as agents of centralised transmission, could be seen as disciplinary methods to stimulate watching television according to their rules, their interests. In this light, for instance, the practice of audience measurement is nothing else but a method to look at people looking - watching subjects objectified. What is at stake here then is the pressure toward organization of reception. It is a *conditio sine qua non* for the arrangement of broadcast television as such: transmission presupposes a will to be received. Of course, this is by no means limited to the operations of commercial television. It is not the economic pursuit of profit that primarily conditions networks to hunt for ways of channeling viewers' behaviour; no broadcasting instance can logically escape this predicament. In this sense, all broadcasting systems are necessarily 'authoritarian', in so far as they are bound to strive for the management and regulation of reception.

In a sense, institutionalized progressivism is even more 'authoritarian' than a commercial network, as it doubly objectifies viewers. First, by turning them into audience, as necessary attribute for the continued existence of the institution itself. Second, because it is an 'authoritarian system with a conscience'[40], by treating them as pawns, as it were, to satisfy its own conscience. It is only ironical, then, that the aim to mobilise audiences behind some utopian ideal ends up in a desire for audiences who are not only sympathetic, but also loyal and 'obedient'. VARA's 'ordinary people' are locked into this positioning. In other words, if

the commercial context is designed on the premise of seduction to consume, the progressivist context as discussed here tends to be unsatisfied with consumption per se. It strives for more than that: paradoxically enough, we could say that it is not just consumption, but a sort of 'passive' consumption that characterizes the behaviour of its imagined ideal viewer. Semiologically speaking, 'passive consumption' is generated when viewer decodings take place within the dominant code, that is, when the communicator's calculated message is read 'correctly'.[41] And exactly this is what institutionalized progressivism is seeking for. Ideally, its ideological messages must come across undamaged and undistorted; preferably, its effect must be persuasion, consent, affirmation. As a result, its textual politics tends to be guided by a privileging of 'closed texts', texts in which the message, i.e. the connections between signifier and signified are fixed and definitive, texts that leave as little space as possible open to differentiated readings.[42] A textual politics, therefore, that aims towards channelling the reception process to the extreme.

It would seem, then, that the arrangement of institutionalized progressivism is trapped in a muddle of structural contradictions, which it cannot freely evade, no matter how sincere and earnest its stated aims. In its assiduous desire to realize another television, a television that would contribute to the emancipation of the people and their active participation to public life, it is finally led to construct an image of the audience -- and consequently, a conception of programming -- that tends to bereave it of its autonomy. In its zealous attempt to mobilize viewers, it finds itself in a field of struggle in which the politics of consumption is at stake: tragically, an original act of, perhaps sentimental, solidarity, has turned

into a structural antagonism, disrupting the 'progressive project' right from the inside.

Beyond utopianism

Does all this mean that the idea of 'progressive television' is by definition doomed to failure? Not necessarily so. The case of institutionalized progressivism, however, clarifies what a 'progressive' politics of television should try to circumvent.

First of all, it should take leave of a transcendental, utopian definition of 'progressiveness': the presumption that there exists an ontological and universal progressive essence, which is seen as the dialectical negation of the 'commercial', the conservative, the hegemonic. In the context of institutionalized progressivism, as I have tried to show, such a starting-point of eternal truth can only lead to an obsessive preoccupation with the strengthening of its own identity/difference, to which all its practices are ultimately subordinated. 'Progressive television' is reduced here to an instrumental status: its task is to proof the legitimacy and effectivity of the project itself, its force is evaluated in terms of the way in which it confirms the preferred, objectifying relationship between institution and viewers. Due to its function as relay of fixed progressive values and ideas, it remains locked within 'the prison of message and meaning'.[43]

This brings us to another, major drawback of institutionalized progressivism. It is all but inevitable that its commitment to the

institution's existential identity would conduce towards what we could call a productivist view of 'progressive television'. What it holds to be decisive is the *production* of television programmes that bear 'progressive' mesages and meanings. The moments of circulation and consumption are thus not only seen as chronologically secondary, but also, ideally, as dedicated followers of the vanguard position taken up by the productive apparatus - if the project is to be pursued successfully. Here again, we see how the idea of an 'obedient' audience becomes an indispensible imperative for institutionalized progressivism. An autonomous politics of reception and consumption is beyond its scope.[44]

To escape this circular mechanism, an entirely different conception of 'progressive television' needs to be developed. For one thing, we have to drop the utopian search for a definite, substantial guarantee for what constitutes 'progressive television'. We have to accept that 'the progressive' can never be a given ideal that transcends time and place, but is something that has to be constructed again and again, under ever changing circumstances. A context-dependent and conjunctural notion of 'progressive television' should be elaborated: 'progressive television' should not be situated in a formal opposition against dominant television, but has to be seen as a temporary and local politico-cultural effect, the dynamic and overdetermined result of a specific confrontation between television and viewers, often unpredictable and seemingly accidental. A 'progressive' moment in that confrontation can take on the form of contestation, but also affirmation; resistance, but also empowerment; angry protest, but also joyful disengagement. It is difficult, if not undesirable to slot these effects, always historically specific and therefore transitory, in reassuringly all-encompassing and permanent

categories such as emancipation and education. Defining 'progressive television' in this way would allow us to take account of the specificity of broadcasting as a cultural practice: it is within the parameters of centralised transmission and privatised reception itself in which moments of breakdown of hegemony should be traced. It is a vision of 'progressiveness' that is stripped of high-flown, utopian connotations, but all the more sensitive, not only to the limitations, but also to the unexpected potentialities of the broadcasting framework. For instance, who can tell in advance what happens when 'the images of women constructed in glossy US soap operas collide with those daily enforced by the rituals of southern Italian catholicism'?[45] It would be absurd to expect some linear, feminist consciousness-raising here, but in some cases, under certain conditions, that collision could well help articulate female provocations of traditional constructions of femininity. 'Progressive' effects such as these cannot be planned, and they will always be temporary and lost again, but that does not make them any less worthwhile.

If anything, this conception of 'progressive television' would lead us to challenge the representative certainty of universal dichotomies posed by more vanguardist forms of progressivism: we all get hooked by television, commercial or otherwise, we may be fawned, but there is no such absolute dividing line between the condescending and the stimulating - as Gitlin would have it.

Of course, this does not mean that the outcome of institutionalized progressivism can never be 'progressive'. It can be, but if it is, then the role of the institution will only be an enabling rather than a determining one. As a context for production, a broadcasting institution is never more than one moment in the whole process in which a 'progressive' effect may

be produced. And perhaps the 'progressive effect' will be most likely in those instances where straightforward 'progressive intentions' seem least at stake.

Let me finish with an apparently anecdotal example. In 1985, VARA had a semi-satirical programme called *Pisa*. Critics were unsatisfied: the programme's satire was, to their mind, not serious enough, too simplistic, too rude to be intelligent. In the spring of 1985, *Pisa* launched Popie Jopie, a playful parody of the Pope. Week after week, Popie Jopie was shown in the most compromising and ridiculous situations: mostly how he woefully failed to bring his visit to that strange country called Holland to a dignified conclusion due to his lack of familiarity with Dutch folklore. By the time the real Pope came to visit the Netherlands - a visit that was accompanied by a grandiose amount of official attention and protection - Popie Jopie had become so popular that it played a major part in the articulation of popular discontent with the visit: the Popie Jopie song could be heard everywhere. It would be too ambitious to state that the programme was responsible for the fact that the visit proved to be politically less successful than hoped for and anticipated, but it certainly helped make it lose much of its haughty aura. For a short moment, the 'great audiences' were there after all.

Notes

1. Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* New York: Pantheon Books, 1985[2], p. 334.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 335.

5. Ibid. , p. 334/335.

6. I use the term 'progressive' rather loosly here to refer to a politico-cultural attitude that is characterized by a leftist opposition to the dominant state of affairs in society. Terms intimately connected with 'progressive' are critical, alternative, subversive, and so on. The substantial differences between these terms are not relevant here.

7. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form.* London: Fontana/Collins, 1974, p. 30.

8. Gitlin, op. cit., p. 334.

9. Gitlin's Marxist background is more explicitly disclosed in some of his other work. See, for example, Todd Gitlin, 'Television's Screens: Hegemony in Transition', in: Michael W. Apple (ed.), *Cultural and Economic Reproduction in Education.* London: RKP, 1982, pp. 202-246.

10. See, for example, Nicholas Garnham, "Public Service versus the Market', in: *Screen,* vol. 24, no. 1, January/February 1983, pp. 6-27; and Ian Connell, 'Commercial Broadcasting and the British Left', in: *Screen,* vol. 24, no. 6, November/December 1983, pp. 70-80.

11. The setting up of the British Channel Four could be seen as a recent example of this.

12. I cannot go into the complicated structure and history of the Dutch broadcasting system here. See, for instance, Ien Ang, 'The Battle Between Television and its Audiences: the Politics of Watching Television', in: Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds.), *Television in Transition.* London: B.F.I., 1985, esp. pp. 258-263.

13. I would like to stress that it is not my intention to give a complete account of VARA's history. This history could be reconstructed from many different angles and perspectives, and it would be impossible to do justice to it here. In this article, my emphasis lies in the ways in which VARA attempts to construct its self-proclaimed 'progressiveness', particularly throughout the seventies and early eighties. A more comprehensive analysis of the role of VARA in social democratic cultural politics and in Dutch broadcasting history is given in: Ien Ang, Paul Pennings and Ido Weijers, *De progressieve cocktail. De VARA en sociaal-democratische identiteiten 1955-1985.* Unpublished manuscript.

14. Andre Kloos in a speech for the Council of the Association of VARA, 10 November 1978. In official VARA discourse, especially exemplified in internal policy notes and the like, the idea of 'progressiveness' is marked out by the extensive use of focal concepts such as 'progressive', 'democratic', 'socialist', 'emancipatory', solidarity', 'tolerance', and 'cultural vanguard'.

15. Of course, television is not VARA's only field of action; it has also a radio department and it produces its own TV Guide. However, as television is seen as 'the most important mass medium', the most vehement discussions within VARA mostly revolve around the issue of what to do with television.

16. This current within VARA was organized within the Werkgroep Socialistische VARA, who was most active in the period of 1975-1976.

17.The most famous programme is *Van Onderen*, a series of documentaries produced and transmitted between 1972 and 1974...

18. See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constitutents of a Theory of the Media', in: Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: the Critical View.* New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979^2, pp. 462-493.

19. See Milo Anstadt, *Op zoek naar een mentaliteit.* Amsterdam: Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1973.

20. See for an account of the rise and success of popular, commercially oriented networks within the Dutch broadcasting sytem, Ang, 'The Battle...', op. cit.

21. *De VARA in perspectief, 1984-1989,* August 1984, p.

22. Due to VARA's inherited engagement with the Labour Party, the social democratic version of left wing politics and culture has remained dominant in VARA's progressivist orientation. For example, VARA's present chairman, Marcel van Dam, was Member of Parliament for the Labour Party before he accepted the new position. Furthermore, VARA's relationship with the radical left such as the Communist Party has always been a troubled and difficult one. Even more so with new social-movements such as feminism and the squatters' movement.

23. It has to be noted here that the stress on popularity as asserted by VARA management is not uncontroversial within VARA. Some contend that striving for popularity would necessarily be imcompatible with being progressive.

24. This interpretation of VARA's programming conceptions is constructed out of a reading of several internal policy and planning statements. I should like to thank the VARA management for allowing me to persuse them.

25. The term 'identity carrier' is used ....

26. See for example, 'Tweestromenland' (Land of two streams), an internal note of the Section

for Television Variety Progammes, November 1982.

27. See interview with Trees te Nuyl,

28. André Kloos, quoted in *Zorg om de cultuur*. Hilversum: VARA, 1983, p. 12.

29. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, p. 93.

30. Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, op. cit., p.56.

31. See, for the distinction between 'audience' and 'public', Andrew Turow, 'Pressure Groups and Television Entertainment', in: Rowland (eds.), *Interpreting Television*. London/Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983, pp. 142-162.

32. The introduction of the category of 'The Ordinary People' within VARA's official discourse was done in het *Totaalplan*,

33. *Totaalplan, 40 per cent*

34. Ibid.,

35. During a public meeting on cultural programming for television, organized by the Stichting Derde Cultureel Net, Paradiso, Amsterdam, March 1986.

36. Letter to comrades,

37. The term is borrowed from Raymond A. Bauer, 'The Obstinate Audience', in: *The American Psychologist*,

38. Cf. Denis McQuail, 'Uncertainty about the Audience and the Organization of Mass Communications', in: Paul Halmos (ed)., *The Sociology of Mass Communicators*. Keele: The University of Keele, 1969, pp. 75-84.

39. Cf. Foucault, op. cit. Compare also John Ellis, *Visible Fictions*. London: RKP, 1982.

40. Raymond Williams, *Communications*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976[3], p. 131.

41. Cf. Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in: Stuart Hall et al (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128-138.

42. Cf. Umberto Eco,

43. Colin Mercer, 'A Poverty of Desire: Pleasure and Popular Politics', in: *Formations of Pleasure*. London: RKP, 1983, p. 86.

44. See Hal Foster, 'For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art', in: Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Port Townshend,WA: Bay Press, 1985, p. 142.

45. Ian Connell and Lidia Curti, 'Popular Broadcasting in Italy and Britain: Some Issues and Problems', in: Drummond and Paterson, *Television in Transition*, op. cit., p. 110.